

Homily: Last Sunday after the Epiphany
(March 6, 2011)

In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

You might be wondering why the Church has assigned the readings for the feast of the Transfiguration (which is celebrated on August 6) for today the Last Sunday after the Epiphany. Looking out the window, it is obvious we are pretty far from August 6.

Well the simple answer is that Christ's transfiguration serves as a pivot point in his life and ministry. It is the moment of turning for Jesus; the moment when he turns towards his purpose, an act of embrace of the plan that God has foreseen for all eternity. The moment of the transfiguration is, as it were, itself an act of sacrifice on the one hand as well as one of revelation on the other. This is why it makes perfect sense that it serve as a bridge between the seasons of Epiphany and Lent.

St. Matthew's placement of his account of the transfiguration only serves to highlight this. He sandwiches it between two of Jesus' statements of impending suffering and death to come at Jerusalem, indicating that Our Lord's mind and heart have already turned towards the Holy City.

The first statement occurs in chapter sixteen, when Our Lord and his disciples are gathered in Caesarea Philippi, the very place where St. Peter utters his great confession that Jesus is the Messiah of Israel.

As you know, Peter's declaration is followed up with a frightening statement by Christ concerning what being the Messiah will entail for him. As Matthew says, "From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo

great suffering...and be killed.” Peter, not liking the announcement, attempts to dissuade Christ from his plan and is rebuked for his efforts.

Following the transfiguration Matthew tells us, “As they were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them, ‘The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him....’” Once again they were all greatly distressed by his words.

That they were in Galilee for the second announcement is important for it means they were moving southward. Caesarea Philippi, the location of the first pronouncement, is way up in the north in Syria while Galilee is located back in Jewish territory, on the road to Jerusalem.

So what Matthew and geography are telling us is that the transfiguration is more than just the point when Jesus turns his face to Jerusalem and death. It is more than just his obedient embrace of the eternal will of his heavenly Father. But it also serves as a lens through which to view that very suffering and death he is freely heading to. The transfiguration is a moment that defines (or perhaps re-defines) suffering in the context of God’s love for us.

As the Last Sunday of Epiphany, we come to the end of the season of light and are about to embark upon Lent; a season of encroaching darkness. Our eyes are beginning to shift away from the star’s light over Bethlehem and, following Jesus’ gaze, they begin to make out the traces of a cross.

The journey through the season of Epiphany or Epiphanytide has been up one side of the mountain. Now with James, Peter and John, we behold the glory of God in a most real and tangible way as we gaze upon the illuminate person of Christ. This

epiphany or showing forth of the Divine sonship of Jesus has confirmed that which Peter has just confessed.

But, like the brilliance of the light and the company of the spirits of Moses and Elijah, we cannot stay atop the mountain forever, as much as we would like to. Unfortunately this goes also for our lives. There are moments of spiritual ecstasy when we are certain that we stand in the presence of the Almighty. But these do not last. They cannot last for we must complete the journey down the other side. We must follow Christ into Lent. For it is only in the valley below can we witness the true power and glory of God.

The glory we will encounter on Good Friday will be simultaneously horrific and salvific. It will be defined as “shame” by the world, but the Church, seeing with the eyes of faith, will witness an event that will make the transfiguration seem dull. The empty tomb will show forth brilliance that the transfiguration can only point to, and partially at that.

And this why Christ brought his closest disciples up the mountain top with him – to provide them with a vision that will sustain them as they walk through the darkness ahead. This is also the reason why the Church offers us this story before we enter the season of Lent.

Lent is experienced as darkness partly because it is a time of intense reflection and scrutiny; a time when we focus our meditations upon our selves in light of the holiness of God and our calling to righteousness. It is a time when we become most

poignantly aware of our mortality and creatureliness, our sinfulness and worthlessness. It is not a pretty picture.

And yet, from the transfiguration we also become aware of the magnificent glory of God that shines forth through the flesh that Christ took on, the very same flesh we wear. By its epiphanal light we discover that God's goodness and mercy can nonetheless shine forth through the brokenness of our mortality, because Jesus chose to put it on and make it his own.

It is in the embracing of this reality wherein our courage and strength to go on the Lenten journey lies. It is in the embracing of the truth that God loved us this much, how we can even hope to come through the other side.

The seventh century Greek monk and priest St. Anastasius of Sinai, in a sermon on the Transfiguration, reminded his congregation that the glory of God displayed to the disciples in Jesus on the holy mount is a glory given to sustain their faith upon the dark road ahead:

While living among them [Anastasius preached] Jesus had spoken of the kingdom and of his second coming in glory, but to banish from their hearts any possible doubt concerning the kingdom and to confirm their faith in what lay in the future by its prefiguration in the present, he gave them on [the Mount] a wonderful vision of his glory, a foreshadowing of the kingdom of heaven.

Thus the same vision of Christ is given by God to us for the reassurance of our faith throughout all the days of our lives but most especially in Lent. It can serve as a counter to any temptation to come down too hard on ourselves as we walk the way of self-examination and penance.

It's light is the glory of God filtered through the love of Christ, shining brightly upon our path to show us the way, even while the shadows lengthen and the night encroaches; as the mists of our minds threaten to hide forever from our perception the very love of God, which willingly allowed himself to be nailed to the Cross for our redemption.

When you encounter moments of darkness think upon the transfiguration of Our Lord; recall the moments in your life when his glory shone through the evening dusk, even if it was but for a fleeting moment. That light comes from Jesus. It is his presence with you; his Spirit guiding and protecting you.

Let the light bathe you in peace. Don't worry about holding on to it; don't worry about it slipping away. God is not yours to hold onto. You are his. And he has you firmly within the arms of his loving embrace. It is his light that pierces through the faults and cracks of our mortal nature and winks at the truth of the world behind the veil; a world that has come, a world that is coming.